JUNE 2024

Governance and Local Development Institute

GOVERNANCE UNCOVERED EPISODE 59 TRANSCRIPT

Decentralization and Recentralization: Governance Dynamics in the MENA Region

Hello and welcome to Governance Uncovered, a podcast brought to you by the Governance and Local Development Institute at the University of Gothenburg. This podcast is supported by the Swedish Research Council.

We are happy to let you know that this is another podcast mashup, this time with the Middle East Law and Governance podcast, in which they talk about governance and social, economic, and ideological transformation in the MENA region. Hosting that show is Ezra Karmel from Proximity International. Ezra joined us in Gothenburg along with Christiana Parreria and Intissar Kherigi to talk about local governance in the MENA post-Arab Spring.

Together with host Ellen Lust, they delve into how decentralization has shaped the political landscapes of countries like Tunisia, Lebanon, and Jordan. Keep listening to hear about the complex balance of power, the role of elites, and the ongoing challenges of governance reform across the region.

Hi, I'm Cristiana Parreira. I'm an assistant professor in the International relations and Political Science department at the Geneva Graduate Institute.

Hi I'm Intissar Kherigi. I'm a research associate at Siences Po in Paris and I'm a visiting lecturer at Ibn Haldun University in Istanbul.

Hi, I'm Ezra Karmel. I work with Proximity International, mostly focusing on research and monitoring and evaluation.

Great. Thank you. And I'm Ellen Lust and I'm the director of Governance and Local Development institute at the University of Gothenburg. I'm glad to welcome you all and to talk a little bit about local governance in the Middle East and North Africa today. Ezra, of course, you've done a lot of work in Jordan as well as in Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa. Intezar you of course know Tunisia extremely well, but

have also done work in Libya, Morocco, Lebanon, Sudan, Yemen and Jordan, and Christianity, of course, also know them, at least in North Africa more broadly, but have done a lot of work in Lebanon. So I thought maybe we'd start out by asking you to lead off into sour. Since the Tunisian uprisings were the first mover in 2010 into 2011 to tell us how you see local governance today and what might have changed since that time.

Yeah, I think the initial months after the uprising, a lot of local governance structures in 2011 in Tunisia witnessed changes because immediately after the Benelli. Had the ruling party was dissolved, the municipal councils were effectively dissolved as well, so there was a kind of vacuum you could say at the local level, and this was gradually filled in very different ways. What we had was kind of a huge variation in local politics and local arrangements. And so there was a kind of de facto. Decentralization that happened similar to some countries around the region. And So what we saw was sort of in 2011 to 2014, the central state trying to regain control over the local level and part of that was a decentralization process, which was decentralizing. But at the same time, sort of also the central state trying to regain authority at the local level and trying to introduce. Local institutions in in a in an organized fashion.

How does that compare to Lebanon or Jordan or elsewhere in the region?

You know it's interesting because I think and you see a lot of these same trends in Lebanon, but some of the the timing is a bit different. For example, this idea of de facto decentralization, I think does happen to a certain extent in the Lebanese case, but much earlier during the Civil War. And what you see since the end of the Civil War in 1990 is these continual attempts. On the part of the state to Recentralise control. And I and I think that process of Recentralization has been one of the poor foundations upon which these post war governing parties have built their power and built out their local power, specifically, as through these municipal institutions.

Yeah. And I guess certainly that recentralization trend has also been taking place in Jordan. I mean, the the process is a lot different. I think in that case where it's much more top down and so there isn't so much a de facto process, but actually a djura process of of intentionally recentralization power and. You know, that's been a long term trend over the past few decades. But then they introduced a decentralization policy in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, partly framed as a. Measure to to respond to the protests during the Arab Spring. But then really it was sort of a longer term process

that was already in motion before then and, you know, calling it decentralization but really using it to shore up central power and moving authorities away from the municipalities and towards deconcentrated. Governor level authorities, so really shoring up the de facto power situation that existed already.

So is this a a matter of change in legal structures and administrative organization, or is it a change in terms of the state just trying to reestablish control? Of course, we don't usually think of the Middle East and North Africa as being at the forefront of decentralization to begin with, right? So so talking about it in terms of recentralization is very interesting. But it sort of suggests that for those who might not know the Middle East and North Africa, that there was some real decentralization. And in place before. So how do we think about this as about state trying to reestablish control, say in Tunisia after the uprisings in Jordan? Or is it about really thinking, OK, we tried to decentralized system and now we've decided to.

Centralized in the Lebanese case I I think you see both. On the one hand, there have been continual sort of legal overtures towards some form of, if not decentralization, then certainly deconcentrated authority. So for example, in a in a lull during the civil war in the late 1970s. The government established a series of sweeping powers that were to be demoted to municipalities and also a funding structure by which there would be transfers from the central state in order for municipalities to to govern most much more extensively. And then the Civil War begins again. And a lot of this becomes a sort of null point, and these attempts to sort of give increased authority to municipalities. Legally and formally continue to happen throughout the early post war era, along with the resumption of municipal election. On the other hand, elites understand this to be potentially a way to reconstitute their authority, but also a potential Ave. for new challengers to emerge to their authorities. So I think there's a constant attempt to balance what can local authorities, local institutions provide as far as electoral resources, resources. To reconstitute the sort of central authority, but then also how can they potentially challenge our authority? What threats might they pose? What might the unintended consequences?

I think in Tunisia it was a little bit different from some of the other countries in the region in the sense that there was a fundamental shift in who was in power after 2011, so. I think we we need to look at. I mean, I look at it generally as insiders versus outsiders and you know in some countries there was a shift from insiders towards outsiders actually getting into office through elections that were held after 2011. It maybe it was a

little bit different in Jordan because there wasn't such a huge. And So what we've seen to this is that there was a big push towards this, you know, democratic decentralization, really this idea of participation, citizen participation, local autonomy, et cetera. But even with all of that political will that existed at a certain moment, it's important not to overstate the power of the central. State to actually decentralize, even when there is great political will, because there is a lot of resistance from national administration, for example. People and it's interesting we see even under Ben Ali in Tunisia before 2011, deconcentration efforts didn't go very far because even under a dictatorship that wanted to do concentrate power for various reasons, there was a lot of resistance from bureaucracy at the central level. So I think it's also important to think about the different actors who involved at the national level and how. They have different interests and incentives. There are national political. Leads. They will have different interests based on their local power base, their whether they're big political parties that have local presence or not, or they they really centered their strategy on maintaining power at the central level. And then you have administrative elites as well who have different sets of interests and then also economic elites and their relationships and how they're trying to shape the decentralization. Process so each country has its own configuration. I think Tunisia probably went further than most at a certain point, but the problem is I think across the regions that you know, decentralization, reforms. Are not really allowed to play out for enough time for you to really see any impact or measure any outcomes.

Yeah. No, I think, I mean, Jordan certainly is on the other end of that spectrum, but certainly. Everything you said is. Is is right on, you know, I mean there was fairly strong municipalities historically in Jordan and their influence, their authorities have been slowly retrenched and move back to the center. But I I think what's really interesting in the Jordanian case to. You know, build on the last point you made is that there was a explicit decentralization law introduced in 2015 that attempted to reorganize the the governance system and introduced a number of interesting things like local authorities that are elected governor and officials that are elected. But they only really gave it a few years to to play out and already we have a new. Local governance law that's been put in place and they just really didn't give the experiment a try at all. And so you had people being elected, especially at the governor level, that had never been in politics before, they didn't know whether, for example, they were even government officials or if they. Maybe consider themselves civil society. They didn't have offices. They didn't know what their responsibilities were, and so they just kind of sat there and did nothing for a few years. And then everyone said, well, that didn't work. Let's change the system. You know, they didn't give the time that I think is just necessary for all local governance and especially decentralization reforms to to really take root and to actually. You know, improve and there was a couple of outliers where there was kind of entrepreneurial

officials within the local level of the governor level that actually managed to do a couple of. Things and probably other governments would have started to, you know, learn from example, but they were only given one term, and then they they got rid of the whole system and now they've kind of. Said. OK, that sort of experiment with political decentralization, if we can call it that, like elected officials, has essentially been thrown out the door. They got rid of the local authorities, they essentially made the governor councils like half elected or. Indirectly elected. And so they've just kind of said, alright, well, let's just focus on administrative stuff now. Because that sort of political or electoral things just just aren't working.

Picking up from Intisar's point about the different sets of elites, right, because we just described it almost as an engineering exercise, right? So they tried something. Doesn't seem to work. Let's try something different, even if it's. But you can also imagine that there are actors who really don't want to see it work to begin with, right? That there's there's opposition to decentralization. And so that they can take the moment of this hasn't worked as quickly as maybe the popular will wants it to, if not the other elites. And so let's make a case for stepping back or changing things or doing things differently. So should we think of this as state elites not understanding that it takes longer to implement reform and therefore kind of jumping the gun on let's change? Or should we understand this as opposition coming and being able to sort of? Use this quote UN quote failure as leverage and undermining it.

Yeah. No, I I think for sure in the Jordanian case anyways, it was more justification than it was sort of a. An unsuccessful experiment where I mean essentially everyone was opposed to to decentralization and there was no public support for it. It was really a top down policy that came from the court and so people kind of made it work, but they weakened it as much as they possibly could. When the the law was passed in 2015 and almost everyone tried to prevent. Decentralization from being an effective, useful thing, and the really interesting thing is if you look at the draft. That were successively made in 2015, before they they passed the law, all sorts of things were there that are now in the new law. So like they had discussed indirectly elected government officials and all sorts of measures that five years later when they redid it, they essentially went back to the to the earlier drafts. And so I think the. The sort of. The Ministry of Interior and the real opponents of decentralization at the start have essentially just kind of reasserted their will. Now, as they've got to this, quote, UN quote, failure of of decentralization and got the sort of local governance reform that they actually wanted.

And what's the impetus for the court in the sense of is this about the courts interest or is this something that's also being sort of championed by the international community? And I'm curious to know as well and for thinking in Tunisia or Lebanon or elsewhere in the region.

I mean, I think starting with the Jordanian case, certainly there was like a long-term interest locally. I think in having decentralization in terms of dealing with some inequality and that. Sort of thing, but certainly this there was this tension between is decentralization going to to help to democratize Jordan or is it going to help to just improve administration? And I think that democratization discourse happened because there was a lot of international interest in it. There was a lot of promised funding for. For Jordan, if they decentralized and they sort of just rammed it through with this framing of democracy, and I think that's why we have like 2 new elected layers of government. Essentially, but then now that that didn't work, the donors aren't interested anymore. No one's funding decentralization anymore. No one's promising anything now they just gone back and turned to what they actually wanted through decentralization, which is, you know, has nothing to do with political reform.

I think it's it was different in the Tunisian case because we saw decentralization being raised as a claim pretty quickly. Actually, after the 14th of January in 2011, when Benali left and the regime kind of. Collapsed, and so decentralization was a quite a we can say domestic demand before we really have international organizations coming in and it had a different content I think to what had been promoted by international organizations before 2011. So it went from being sort of administrative, which was what being discussed by international organizations. For to being more political, decentralization and the idea when writing the Constitution between 2011 and 2013 was really this idea of deepening democracy, and it was seen by these outsiders who had gotten into power from different political orientation. But they were quite determined to try to put in place what they called guarantees against a return to dictatorship. So decentralization was seen as a way of creating more institutions that could prevent a return, which unfortunately hasn't happened, as we see, which is an interesting question to to research further. So in the beginning. The framing of decentralization was very different according to who you talked to. So the political actors were interested in political decentralization. They were really concerned about electoral rules. You know the the municipal councils, how they would be composed. The powers to some extent and the international organizations were much more interested in, you know, state capacity, administrative decentralization, all of that. And what we saw is that these different visions of decentralization created a process where

actually a lot of the the pieces of the puzzle were missing. So the the politicians were thinking more about political decentralization, and they didn't really think through fully. What does decentralization mean for development? And that was much more what citizens are interested in. Citizens. The revolution was essentially, you know, set of economic grievances and political grievances. But the the political side was addressed much more in the decentralization process, but the developmental side, which is really complicated actually. How can you get decentralization to deliver local development was something that was left to the side, maybe because it was so complicated. So the other aspects, like what kind of powers do you decentralize the fiscal resources? I think are something that has been an issue that has been avoided across the region and so you had these Councils been created similarly to, you know, Jordan and others where they didn't really have the powers and the resources to to really create local development and that's what citizens are interested in in seeing. So I think it sort of highlights the need to think about decentralization through these different lenses, not just the political decentralization. Really thinking about the the fiscal aspects and the administrative aspects and the state capacity is and all of that makes it very complicated. And then this is further complicated by the speed of decentralization, right? Because you know, some countries in the region, some actors in Tunisia as well, wanted rapid decentralization. And with that you have to give up some things you can't work on everything at the. Time. But then this gradualist approach to decentralization, very controlled decentralization that we see in Jordan and maybe Lebanon to some extent, Morocco as well, and others. This controlled decentralization ends up having very little impact because you were decentralizing so slowly that really. The ingredients are not there to have any real, tangible impact for citizens, and that might explain. And why, you know, decentralization doesn't have huge support. I think because it hasn't been able to deliver. You don't have this huge transfer suddenly of resources and responsibilities, which would make local councils, you know, real bodies that citizens would go to to get things done.

Yeah, it's, it's interesting to hear these observations from other contacts, Tunisia. Jordan, where it seems that there has been some real top down attempt at least to decentralize. And in in the Lebanese case, I think you don't see that, or at least you haven't seen that thus far. It's specified. In fact in the TALITH agreement, which was the Civil War ending agreement in 1990, that there will be full administrative decentralization, and this is verbiage that's often leveraged by civil society. Organizations, activists who call for decentralization to be implemented on the terms that we've been discussing according to sort of best practices, and this would of course include, I think Intisar made this point some sort of real fiscal autonomy. And increase concomitantly in the ability of local governments to raise their own funding and really

be fiscally autonomous to a certain extent from the central state. And this just is is just not the case in Lebanon. And so as a result, because because the central state has never made any real attempts to decentralize, there have been bills on the table. They really haven't proceeded past sort of initial legislative steps. So instead, people can sort of map onto this concept decentralization, sort of whatever is in their political imagination. And this has taken a lot of different forms in Lebanon recently. There are people who advocate for a quite extreme or radical form of of federalism. For example, there are people who advocate for really radical forms of political decentralization. And then there are other people. Who push back? Quite vociferously against that. And at the same time, because there has been no real decentralization, but on the other hand, there has been this sort of devolution of governance, which is, I think, a common trend people can use that to sort of justify the decision to not decentralize. I I remember interviewing a former Member of Parliament who had been on a decentralization. Committee in the early 2000s in Lebanon. He said, you know, initially I was convinced of the value of decentralization, but now I look today at the way these municipalities function and we can't do this. He analogized it to a cancer. He said the cancer of corruption will metastasize everywhere if we allow decentralization because look at the way these municipalities function today. And of course, these municipalities. Part function the way they do as entities that are really dependent on political forces in the center to govern as political entities in which elites often have very short term and predatory incentives because they can't really do anything substantial. Of course, this is a result of a lack of decentralization, in part, according to best practices, but it's also used in turn, to sort of justify and reify a status quo in which municipalities have a variety of core responsibilities, but in fact they have very little real capacity to govern in. And again, a way that we would consider to be sort of best practices, or in keeping with. Giving citizens sort of real voice.

In the Lebanese case, is really interesting, right? Because it is the case with the most municipalities per population, right? So in a sense, it's got more municipalities, but it also has a number of them that have very little staff and very little infrastructure. So it's a great example of municipalities that almost by design, if if not. At least by by sort of the structure of them are not well set up to to succeed, right? So that's the the.

Irony. And there's a political logic to this. When you look at periods in Lebanese history in which municipalities were rapidly created. These are periods in which elites are trying to reconstitute their authority. There was a massive push toward municipalization, for example, in the 1990s, in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, and as municipal elections were about to resume. Of course, a municipality with 304 hundred people. I

think over 70% of municipalities according to a study by the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies a few years back, over 70% of municipalities don't have a single employee. You know what are these municipal councils really going to be capable of doing other than acting as intermediaries for much more powerful political entities at the level of the central state, which is really what they end up being? In many cases.

So this is a top down approach, right? Or a top down look at what's going on. We can also think about what's changed on the ground. Right. And some of it may be through municipal councils and through local government, some of it is also of course taking place as we see business interest increase and business become, for example, arguably more powerful and some of the power, for example, of tribes declining in places or just different sets of expectations. And to Sarah, when you're talking about the post Revolution, expectations about what should be taking place. So we have all these other sets of changes taking place. So my question to you all is to what extent have we seen changes on the ground if we're looking at the local level? In terms of how governance is taking place.

I think that there are mixed results and you can see I mean part of the thing with decentralization is that you allow different localities to do different things. So you have to expect there's going to be a lot more variation. So I mean, one of the probably the risks is the increase in inequalities between municipalities. So what we saw in Tunisia. Is that some municipalities that had, you know, great resources? Like you know, the larger municipalities like Tunis facts, you know, etcetera, who have, you know administration similar to a ministry, a central ministry, we're able to start thinking at a high level about regional development, about large scale projects and then you have the smaller municipalities, especially the ones who are newly created because. Let's not forget that there were 86 municipalities that were completely new that didn't have similar to Lebanon, didn't have a building, didn't have. I mean, I interviewed mayors who were like, you know, it's just me and. Cleaner and you know, it's really difficult in that kind of situation. And so I think those were really struggling with the very basic municipal services. But then again, you have to think well, the the residents in those areas didn't even have a municipality and didn't even have the right in the law to receive municipal services. So they would have been governed before sort of indirectly through the governorate. And through these rural councils that existed. So there is an improvement, even if you're talking about really basic municipal functions, there is an improvement if you are at least providing something is better than nothing. But you do see greater variation and that depends really on, you know, the stability of the municipal council internally, whether you know the mayor has enough of a A majority

coalition within the Council to be able to get things done. The relationship between the municipal council and the municipal administration became something really. Important because suddenly you had in the place of a one party regime, you had pluralist democratic regime where you had all of these parties that were competing, and then the administration, which has to position itself in relation to all of this policy. And then you also have local resources, you know, do you have a good economic base? Is there a private sector that can also contribute? Is there a good tax base? So I think you saw huge variation, but there were signs, for example in Tunisia, that there were some improvements in areas like, for example, mayors and miscible councils that I interviewed were able to increase tax revenues. So there were incentives for them to start collecting revenues a bit more. Effectively, the the involvement of women and young people was a notable improvement in Tunisia because we had 47% of the elected municipal councilors were women, and in my interviews, you know, those women were having the first political experience as elected officials. And and there's sadly not enough research to really think about what kind of. Residual effect has that had in the longer term, how will that political learning be translated? But we do know, for example, that in the elections that happened at national level in 2023, we had local elected officials, mayors, etcetera running for national office. I mean, however flawed those elections were. But that's still an indication that, you know, the local elections and local governance was able to sort of regenerate the national political elite. To some extent. So there are some bright spots. I would say that, but I think what it illustrates is that obviously, decentralization is a kind of iterative process where there needs to be a constant recalibration of the process to address, for example, lack of oversight, contributing to increased corrupt. Option, lack of capacity, etc.

Yeah, I mean I I think if we think through the Jordanian cases a bit bleaker maybe than Tunisia where I, I'm not sure that we've really see too much change, especially not because of like decentralization per say, maybe we're seeing local governance changes, but I don't know if it's necessarily linked to this decentralization law. I think as we're moving sort of away from this. Assad of having some sort of, you know, democratic impact of decentralization we and taking more seriously the role. Of decentralization, reforms and local governance reforms and actual administration. I think maybe some of the local input into policy is getting better and particularly at service level where there is now better processes to identify local needs and to translate to to the government and to get that down.

What do those look like?

I think like there has been very poor capacities previously for identifying just what a municipality needs. So you know, right after the decentralization law went into effect and the governor councils were elected, if you went around and asked them, you know, what is your community need? They would say hospitals, school. It doesn't matter if there was one already. There doesn't matter if they needed one. They just had the same sort of list of requirements in every single municipality. And now I think there's getting to be a slightly more nuanced. Process in that where they're actually able to to go out and maybe collect some data and see you know what is actually helpful within the community. And I think the sort of getting rid of some of the extra layers of governance may actually help with that where you have like people from the municipality now informing what's happening at the government level. So there's a bit more of a interconnection between the levels and not people sort of fighting over turf and fighting over ideas. So I think that's one positive trend that's happening. I think at the same time though, what we're losing as a result of that is by taking out the local authorities. That was an opportunity for a lot of women to get into politics. You know, at the very local level. And now that mechanism is gone. And so it's a bit unclear, you know how those opportunities will happen in the coming. Actions. And I think now the elections are becoming more important at the local level because there's more of a link with partisan politics hopefully emerging within Jordan and so be really nice to see local level politics actually creating a door to get women connected into that partisan arena that's emerging.

Yeah, I see. A common theme here as the sort of hope and potential promise that local politics, and specifically local elections, would act as an Ave. For mechanisms that promote accountability, some sort of elite turnover and the entry of new political actors, perhaps reform minded or those with sort of ambitions toward the public good. And I think this is also the hope in the Lebanese case, given that the vast majority of local electoral competition in Lebanon. Occurs between you know and a small allied set of governing parties that always run in elections together at the local level. They essentially form non compete agreements. Then they compete in these elections, often against local families or unaffiliated sort of independent nonpartisans. And you know 95% of the time they win. And so this sort of different opposition minded political actors have attempted to disrupt this sort of dynamic and to essentially introduce new electoral competition and to start that process at the local level. And you see pretty limited success. So in in Beirut and the most recent municipal elections in 2016. For example, there was a reformed minded list called Beirut's my city that received a good amount of the popular vote. Vote, but at the sort of intersection of political behavior and institutions, because this was a majoritarian electoral system, they received no seats on the Council despite receiving about 1/3 of the vote. So these local level attempts to

disrupt the political status quo have not been particularly successful thus far. One might imagine that in the aftermath of this protest wave that happened in Lebanon in 2019, municipal elections happening after that, you might see the entry of these. New Revolution or change affiliated candidates, but the state has now postponed municipal elections several times. They're doing so under the sort of justification that, because of the economic crisis, it's not possible to fund these elections and to administer them adequately. So we don't really know what the sort of consequences of some of these. Disruptions at the macro level of politics might be for local competition, and there's again, there's a political logic to why these elections have been delayed.

Sorry, I was just gonna say what? What do you think about the ordering of elections, like between local and and parliamentary? Does that have a significant impact on how those sort of political dynamics play out?

Absolutely. When I was doing my field work in in Lebanon, I was doing it in the immediate aftermath of the municipal elections in 2016. And then there ended up being national legislative elections in 2018 and even prior to those elections being announced, which I believe they were announced in late 20. 17 people would often frame both national and local. Political officials would frame the municipal elections as a sort of testing ground for national elections. They were demonstrating what sort of, you know, local stakes were. They were also a testing ground for which sorts of political alliances would be more or less acceptable to people at a popular. Level and they were a demonstration of political strength, or lack thereof. But I also think this process is iterative. So in the aftermath of these national elections, oftentimes political officials would look to those results and they would try to recalibrate and say, OK, well, we received 80% of the vote and this other party received 10%. So that's going to factor into. How we run in municipal elections. So I think there's a sort of iterative relationship there.

And maybe not within the same like election cycle. But then do you see a lot of people moving from the local level to the national level in terms of like, that's a testing ground for being a politician? And then moving up to the the national level or yeah, national?

Level I think you do see this to a certain extent, particularly when it comes to larger, more urban municipalities and it's kind of interesting in the Lebanese case, you see several people who attempted to sort of run more opposition minded. Municipal

elections lists, for example, who endorsed lists at the municipal. Level, some of whom were successful and some of whom were unsuccessful in 2016, and then who kind of parlayed those efforts in the aftermath of the protests into national electoral ambitions. So I think this pipeline is is limited. So people in Peri, urban or rural municipalities are more likely not going to be successfully running for. But in larger urban municipalities, it definitely exists. I don't know what that's like in the maybe the Tunisian case, whether there's analogies there.

I think there there wasn't enough time for a pipeline to develop because the elections municipal elections were held in 2018 and the national legislative elections were held in 2019. So already the mayors. Were in place and the musical councils they were. We're going to, you know, resigned to run for MP's because they had just started and then we didn't get to have the 2023 elections in the way that they were planned because of the measures, emergency measures that were put in place in and July 2021. But I think what's interesting is that municipal councillors and mayors started to carve out a place for themselves in their national political parties. For those that will partisan. So what we started to see is that parties that I think this is across the region, many of the countries across region, political parties are very centralized and tend to be based mainly in their capital and and tend to be mainly sort of elites at the at the national level and they're interested largely in power at the national level. And what we saw is sort of a decentralization of political parties. Starting in Tunisia. Because for the first time they had elected local officials who were claiming legitimacy and who were starting to claim also power within the political parties. So what was really interesting to see is how local party structures, so local party officers started to have to develop institutional mechanisms for coordinating with municipal councillors, right? Because they have these people on the municipal council. But there was no sort of institutional mechanism for their representation within the political party. So they had to create new mechanisms like, OK, so you are now going to be part of the decision making structures at the local party level and also there some of the parties started integrating municipal councillors and mayors at the national level. So they started to become sort of, they started to have votes at the national level in, like, party congresses and things like that. So what's interesting is that political decentralization can also create new dynamics within political. Parties that further decentralization, right. Because then parties become more decentralized and we know generally sort of federalism, literature and all of that, that decentralized parties are more interested in decentralization because they have local party structures that are strong. So you start to have these feedback loops that are quite interesting to see.

What about Jordan?

Actually, this is probably a better question for you.

What do you think? Well done. Very nice. Yeah.

No, no. I wish I had actually paid enough attention to the last elections to. Able to to answer that. I think it's a. It's a fascinating question actually, right. The extent to which these both provide the feedback loops that you're talking about with with regards to parties, of course, that's not going to take place in Jordan, right. But thinking about how they may potentially alter kind of the power structures and the local sets of power because we do know things that. For example, we're looking at to feel are other places that we've had a lot of frustration with the gap between what MPs are doing and what local communities want, even when they technically represent them in terms of tribe etcetera, right? So I mean, I don't know if that's changed since I. Was a closer student of Jordan and if that's self an interesting question to what extent those dynamics change, but also the ways in which kind of local affects the national.

Yeah, like I, I can't imagine that the sort of rules of the game have changed that much because the overall incentive system hasn't changed within the elections. But I do think like I was speaking with some campaigners as the election cycle starts up this time and it's a very different election law. Uhm, there's a bit more incentive to work well, not only for parties to actually field candidates across the country, which is new, but to link that up with the the local parties, right. So what we'll be running in the municipal elections, but all of them were complaining that they were running the national elections before the municipal elections and would like to see that the other way around. You know, I don't know if it would actually have a significant impact, but but it seems to be there a fairly key grumble that I was hearing from them.

Interesting. I mean from a technical point of view, right, it's often more difficult to run municipal elections than it is to run the national elections, right? So you can also see that from a different perspective than it's not even strategic in terms of the politics, but just sort of administrative perspective as an explanation, even if not one that people want to. To see or accept. This is fascinating. I want to ask if there are, you know, kind of key messages either for scholars in terms of where the research gaps we've identified

some of them or for the international community or for local communities in terms of what you think are places to look for, right. What are key points at which we might? Think that there were changes or key messages in terms of things that you would like people to do differently or to take on board and give more emphasis. That's an easy question for you.

I think one thing that was really interesting and I think intisar sort of was hinting at it a bit earlier where we're talking about the different kinds of decentralization. And like this, you know, there wasn't fiscal decentralization, but there was administrative decentralization or we're talking about the differences doing political and administrative. I think the other big thing is ordering of decentralized. Like what is the first step? And I think that comes back to, of course, decentralization is political. And so if it's top down, there's very specific interest in terms of, like give them the sort of political decentralization, give them enough rope to hang themselves. And, you know, don't give them any of the administrative capabilities of the financial capabilities to do that. And of course, if decentralization is coming from a like a bottom up movement. You're going to be asking for very different things. No one wants responsibilities without resources to deliver on them, and I know there's some research on this ordering process, but I think looking at. That the ordering of decentralization in different contexts and how that plays out, you know, in Tunisia or across the region, I think would be a really interesting and quite practical step, because I think also as implementers are looking at supporting local governance programs, it's a big question of, like, how much are we going to push into different areas in in order to help this. Reform process and not really a lot of solid evidence of how best to approach that.

Yeah, I think picking up on that, I think the complexity of decentralization reforms are that there are so many parts moving parts at the same time. But I I think there are certain essential parts that can't be. Looked and I think the the relationship between decentralization and deconcentration needs to be looked at a little bit better because what we saw in in Tunisia is that decentralization was seen to mean local elections. And you know, a local authorities code. You know, once we get that done, that's decentralization. But actually if you don't change. Lots of other things in the legal framework. Local authorities can't do their jobs, so the two have to go in tandem. So I think deconcentration has to be addressed, you know, so there have to be ways to to think through how to actually get different ministries on board and have it as a transversal process. That essentially is going to be maybe slower, but in the end might be a little bit more effective because sort of racing ahead with local elections, but not really having all the other things in place not changing the the tax code, not changing

the public service code, not really thinking about all these other things is not going to get really a lot of things. Done so, I think that's one thing and I think also the importance of political parties. I think that there. There's a lot of, I mean, in the Tunisian context, certainly there's a lot of support for civil society and I think that's really important. And civil society played an important role in pushing for decentralization, changing, getting the the local authorities code changed. You know, when it was still in draft form through, you know, 17 different versions. But at the same time really thinking about the importance of training. Political officials, really that sort of knew, you know, 7200 new councillors in Tunisia who didn't know what they were going to be doing, who had a local authorities code that was adopted 10 days before their elections. So really thinking about the importance of political parties, which I think are. Have terribly weak presence in a lot of countries at the local level, so thinking about you know how to work with political parties, train them and create incentives for the central bodies of political parties to to strengthen their local branches. I think that's really important.

Sometimes in these discussions of the Middle East, Lebanon becomes a little bit of an outlier. And I think I fear this is about to become one of those times, but. But I think in Lebanon to a certain extent, the discussion is is a couple of steps back and it's it's almost taken a back seat because of the number of different crises that have unfolded in the last five years, including, you know, the the basic insolvency of the administrative state, the sort of collapse of the bureaucracy as a result of the financial crisis, the currency devaluation that you know. Affected people on mass and also affected. The capacity of the state in a pretty severe way, and so these discussions of decentralization, draft laws that were put on the table are now very much not at the forefront of of how people are thinking about what reform needs to happen. On the other hand, you have a situation in which. Governing elites are in an unprecedented position of weakness. And one might look into sort of what incentivizes these elites to maybe tie their hands and pursue avenues of reform that they might not otherwise want to in these types of times. So as discussions of, you know, for example, an IMF deal in Lebanon, proceed if they if they do proceed in the next few years, it'll be interesting to kind of. I would like for scholars to look at what are the different incentives that these party elites face in Lebanon? What are the conditions under which they might be? Guided toward pursuing some types of reform, including some forms of decentralization that they might not otherwise have wanted to necessarily. And then I also think. What has happened on the ground in in local institutions and with local elites as a result of these crises in Lebanon is is quite interesting. So I I think of the the 2019 financial crisis as a really a a critical juncture at which the ability of the central state. To. To control local governments and to politically influence them in the way that they were doing over the previous decades was really disrupted. On the other hand, this

economic crisis also produced unprecedented need and political parties and elites stepped in to fill that void. So these are sort of competing. Influences right? On the one hand, elites were had never been weaker or more unpopular in recent memory, and on the other hand they were more necessary than ever. And this is in part a consequence of this continually recentralization system. And so seeing how governance unfolded on the ground, and in particular, how local elites responded to this really dizzying and complex array of circumstances, I think scholars are looking into that. And that would be a really interesting Ave. to to pursue further.

Thank you so much. Really really appreciate you. Joining us and yeah, thank you.

Thank you very much.

Thank you.

Thank you Ellen.

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